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LETTERS TO GODS: CONTEXTS OF AN EGYPTIAN TRADITION

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Introduction

Egyptian letters to gods—variously referred to by their authors as ‘pleas’ (*hrw*), ‘cries’ (*š*), ‘requests’ (*wh3*), ‘documents’ (*bk*), ‘memoranda’ (*mkmk*) or ‘prayer-letters’ (*š^c.t n šll*)—are messages by private individuals, submitted to one or more deities in the hope of gaining their assistance in everyday affairs, such as problems of health, family and business. Letter-writers often complain about cases of injustice and unfair treatment, requesting protection for themselves and punishment for their adversaries. Thematically, the documents fall in three general categories. The majority are *complaints*, which focus on the mistreatment or injustice the letter-writers have suffered, and highlight their isolation and desperation. A fair number of the letters complain about robbery, theft, and other cases of misappropriating property, while others concentrate on health problems and vexation perceived as the contrivances of angry spirits. Most complaints are combined with *requests*, in which the letter-writers specify the kind of assistance they expect from the gods: in the majority of cases they ask them to render justice, take revenge, and provide protection. Much less frequently, requests may also occur independently. The third category is constituted by *vows*: in these documents the letter-writers promise to make a donation to the invoked deities (or their temples and cult administrations) in return for the solution for their problems: these letters mostly deal with problems of health, including childlessness.

This is a Demotic genre, which sets the time frame for the documents: the earliest letters were written in the Saite and Persian Period, the majority of the documents stem from Ptolemaic times, and one is attested from the beginning of the Roman era. More than forty examples are known so far. The length of the documents is varied: there are short pleas, which are only a few lines long, while some may consist of thirty lines or more. The letters are scribbled on a variety of different writing surfaces: most of them on papyri, some on ostraca and linen strips, and a few on pottery vessels and wooden tablets. This partly reflects the general trend in Demotic epistolography, what is different, however, is the relatively high proportion of alternative writing material, especially linen, pottery and wood, which are virtually non-existent in the case of letters written to earthly correspondents, and which may point to a ritual use of the objects. The format and style of the texts are also varied: while some of them show the marks of the epistolary form, and contain exterior and/or interior addresses, greeting and closing formulas, courtesies, and other phrases characteristic of letters, a similar number are composed as petitions. Most of the documents are characterised by the writer’s deep despair that leads to the use of high-toned, poignant and feverish language, others, however, are surprisingly restrained and matter-of-fact.

Letters to gods cannot be tied to a specific geographical area, although most seem connected to one of a few chief localities: Tuna el-Gebel, Thebes and Esna in Upper Egypt, Saqqara in Lower Egypt, and settlements in the Fayum (Tebtynis, Euhēmeria, Theadelphia). Based on finds from excavation contexts, we may suppose that most of the Tuna el-Gebel material, as well as that of Saqqara, comes from the cemeteries of the sacred animals. Besides these, a small number of documents were discovered in or near private tombs (none of which, however, have a documented archaeological context), while several texts suggest that a deposition within the temple was also a possibility, and at least one letter is actually documented to have been found inside a sanctuary.

Starting points, structural outlines

It may be conspicuous at first glance that Demotic letters to gods do not form a unified corpus. In fact, the starting point for my study was the realisation that an analysis of the Demotic material requires one to take the unique characteristics of each document into consideration; trying to make deductions about the corpus in its entirety may lead to a distortion of the evidence. Another point of departure was the idea that it is worth placing the texts in a wider context; instead of examining a Demotic corpus that happens to consist of pleas invoking otherworldly powers, one should survey the complete corpus of ancient Egyptian letters to the beyond, and then pay special attention to the texts written in the Demotic script. This approach of transcending the confines of script, and even those of language, made it possible to reconsider previous hypotheses in view of a wider context and a larger corpus, and suggest new interpretations both in the reading of specific documents, and in the wider understanding of the phenomenon in general.

Accordingly, the study is divided into four parts. Part One provides a brief survey of the main text types under discussion: hieratic letters to the dead from the Late Old Kingdom to the Late Period, hieratic documents generally classified as precursors to letters to gods from the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period, the Demotic corpus, as well as Greek and Coptic prayers for justice from both pagan and Christian Egypt, accompanied with a review of the previous research concerning these source groups. In Part Two, I focus on the Demotic material, and attempt to reconstruct the actual practice of appealing in writing to gods, based partly on the bits and pieces of the available archaeological information, and on the internal evidence that can be deduced from the texts themselves. Part Three concentrates on the language of the texts. Since letters to gods were not ad hoc creations, but carefully constructed compositions, written in a format and style that was both formulaic and individualistic, I survey here the texts types

that influenced the compositions, the characteristic terminology of the letters and their rhetorical tactics, then attempt to define the relationship between the hieratic, Demotic and Coptic material in Egypt on the one hand, and the relationship between the Demotic and Greek corpus in- and outside the Nile valley on the other. Based on the firm belief that sound interpretations can only be gained through a close examination of the sources and a first-hand reading of the original texts, the last part of the study contains the transliteration, translation and philological commentary of the texts under discussion from the New Kingdom to the Roman Period; an overview of the letters to the dead, and the Greek and Coptic documents from Christian Egypt is given in the Appendices.

Summary of results

Letters to the dead—letters to gods

Although most Egyptologists working with this material have noted basic similarities between letters from ancient Egypt addressed to “the invisible” in different periods and in different scripts, little effort has been made so far to examine the precise nature of this relationship and to analyse the hieratic, Demotic, Greek and Coptic corpus from a common perspective. Instead of envisaging a continuous line of development that connects Old and Middle Kingdom letters to the dead through New Kingdom precursors to letters to gods with the Demotic corpus itself, I have argued for a more nuanced relationship between these genres. It was George Hughes who first linked Demotic letters to gods to the earlier corpus of the letters to the dead in his first article that focused on letters to deities.¹ Based primarily on the obvious thematic similarities, Hughes suggested that Demotic letters to gods were the direct descendants of the letters to the dead, and this view has been widely followed ever since: letters to the dead and letters to gods are generally believed to be linked not only by their common thematic traits, but also through a textual tradition. I have not been able to discover the traces of this textual tradition: apart from similarities in content that point to common circumstances in the lives of the letter-writers, and common cognitive strategies employed in finding solutions, one cannot detect a similar set of formulae or a universal terminology that would provide a textual connection between the two corpora.² The two genres represent independent developments that were probably triggered by similar situations and needs, within their own social and historical milieu. It was equally difficult to find a clear connection between Demotic letters to gods and the very few documents from the late New Kingdom and the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, which are

¹ Hughes 1958.

² This result underlines the hypothesis also formulated recently by Sylvie Donnat Beauquier in a monograph on the letters to the dead (Donnat Beauquier 2014).

generally cited as precursors to the letters to gods because their authors address deities for help and protection. These texts do not even form a homogenous group in themselves, and appear to be isolated expressions of a concept that took at least another five hundred years to develop into a specific textual genre, largely triggered by the proliferation of sacred animal cults in Egypt and the opportunities that these cults created for appealing to the gods.

Demotic letters to gods—Greek and Coptic prayers for justice

The popularity of Demotic letters to gods seems to peak under Ptolemaic rule, a period when the cults of the Egyptian gods drew adherents not only from the native population, but also from among the Greek immigrants who had settled in the country. The identification of a Demotic influence on one of the earliest Greek papyri from Egypt, the famous curse of Artemisiē, goes back to an article by Kurt Sethe.³ The connections between Demotic letters to gods and Greek prayers for justice, which have since been briefly noted by Demotists and classical philologists,⁴ have been amply substantiated by the present survey of textual links between the documents. This has proved to be a point worth highlighting not only because it provides safer grounds for the interpretation of a number of individual documents, but also because it suggests that the Egyptian tradition played a far greater role in the development of Greek prayers for justice than was formerly supposed. Similarly, the inclusion of Coptic judicial prayers from Christian Egypt in the analysis has shed light on how the latter corpus drew not only on the Graeco-Roman genre of prayers for justice and on Late Antique magical koinē in general, but also relied heavily on the earlier Egyptian practice in the construction of the appeals.

Letter-writers and the cult administration

In the past decades, two theories have been advocated concerning the Demotic practice of writing letters to gods. On the one hand, Dieter Kessler, based on archaeological and epigraphical evidence from Tuna el-Gebel, claimed that all the petitioners at that site were institutionally linked to the ibis catacombs, and that the lack of a membership in a religious association of the given deity meant an exclusion both from the practice and from the restricted priestly knowledge that lay behind it.⁵ Thus, “common Egyptians” had no opportunity to appeal to a deity personally, but were forced to rely on the paid services of a temple scribe or priest to get their pleas to the invoked deity. On the other hand, Harry S. Smith and others, working in the

³ P. Vindob. G1. Sethe 1913.

⁴ Versnel 1991; Vittmann 1995.

⁵ Kessler 1989; Kessler, in Von den Driesch et al. 2005.

animal cemeteries in North Saqqara, have repeatedly emphasised that popular belief played an equally definitive role in the maintenance of the cults there, and that not only cult personnel, but ordinary people, too, had the possibility of addressing the deities with petitions.⁶

My survey of the complete corpus of Demotic letters to gods and the analysis of their archaeological contexts have shown that the two theories outlined above are, in fact, not irreconcilable. One of the most conspicuous features of the letters to gods is their versatile nature: their freedom of composition, and the lack of uniformity in the process of getting the messages across. The differences are partly due to the different characteristics of the sites that the documents originate from: even if a regular presence of “pilgrims” is not attested at Tuna el-Gebel, the case may have been different in Saqqara, which was visited by most travellers between Alexandria and the chōra, and certainly dissimilar in Deir el-Bahari, where there is clear evidence of a regular pilgrimage to the healing shrine of Amenhotep and Imhotep. Also, appealing to gods through the mediation of their sacred animals required strategies that were different from what was customary when petitioning deified humans.

Another important factor in determining how an appeal was formulated was the identity and the circumstances of the petitioners themselves. Petitioners either belonged to marginalised groups, such as women, children and the elderly, who were left without protection, or were defenceless victims of fraud and mistreatment. More often than not, it was not legal duties that their oppressors failed to fulfil, but moral obligations, and the outsmarted petitioners were in no position to prove their right. There were Egyptians and Greeks alike among the letter-writers, and while some certainly belonged to the cult administration of sacred animals and may have taken action on their own, this was probably the exception, rather than the rule, and most of them probably relied on intermediaries to have their messages worded, written and transmitted to the gods. Whether the pleas could also be backed with offering gifts, or petitioners were left to rhetorical tactics to provoke compassion, largely depended on the financial situation of the letter-writers.

Intermediaries

The study of the materials that letters to gods were written on and the examination of the act of writing the petitions itself as well as that of the rhetorical strategies used in the texts have put the role of intermediaries in a new light. Intermediaries were not only necessary because people would have gained no access to deposit their petitions without them; they were also influential

⁶ Smith 2002; Nicholson 2005; Davies 2007.

in composing the pleas and participating in their recital before the deity. Letters to gods seem to have operated through a double channel of written and spoken pleas, which probably aimed at multiplying their effect. The written document composed in the proper way and containing the elements necessary for persuasion, served as a reassurance for the reception of the plea, while the spoken words provided a sense of direct contact with the god. Thus, scribes not simply jotted down the complaints of the petitioners, but couched them in adequately persuasive wording. Similarly, priests (who may also have acted as scribes) did not merely act as “postmen” and “cashiers” who managed practicalities such as deposition and payment, but as ritual experts whose knowledge and charisma may have been felt necessary for the success of the petition.

The text corpus

In the course of writing this thesis, I have translated forty-five texts (four hieratic, thirty-three Demotic, one Old Coptic and seven Greek documents). Necessarily building on the work of previous generations of scholars, I hope to have improved the understanding of some of these documents through new readings and interpretations.

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